

# The avant-garde in dry dock

The avant-guard, as the nominal artistic prow of Western culture, was seen the other Saturday from Pier 16 as just one more pitching, rolling, yawing thing. As with the parent vessel, which has, they say, sprung a leak amidships, the avant-guard—at some time went to gambol gleefully in the spray—was seen to pause in virtual state of dry dock. The image ends.

The point was the 1972 edition of the annual New York Avant-Garde Festival vis-a-vis these backward-looking times. Though I managed only a couple quick walk-throughs of the shows and displays set aboard the good ship Alexander Hamilton down alongside the Seaport Museum at South Street, one thing clear to me was the *deja-vu*, even melancholy quality of the vibes on board. Avant-garde doings, of course, like political revolutionary activities, always wear a certain sadness (if the world were both comfortable and just, the warrior knows, people might all find fulfillment within the culture's main-streams). And it is also possible for the avant-garde to look back

and still not lose its futural thrust (a machine age must often be reminded of the soil in which it is planted and needs fresh ways to see its history). But the festival of '72 seemed more off-to-the-side than those natural ironies could alone render it. I suspect that it is the artist-to-audience relationship which has changed. And since avant-garde's very meaning depends on how it affects the audience (how it startles by comparison with art-and-life-as-usual), this is a relationship change with a potential kiss of death attached.

Back in the mid '50's and early '60s when America's main freaks were John Cage, Allan Kaprow, Feldman, Moorman, Paik, Oldenberg, Yoko Ono, Merce Cunningham and company (further out than Beats even), the New York avant-garde was at-the-front as the French military term could imply. The oldest avant-garders had been scandalizing people for some time before Charlotte Moorman, with encouragement from Cage and Varese, organized the 1964 first annual avant-garde show. At Judson Church, in fields and by screams

around town, the free shows of these madmen and maenads were plentiful, however, and the annual festival was hardly noticed, and in fact the very notion of organizing and festivalizing these wild creations seemed right only in that it was itself so weird a thing to do. The Beatles came and went . . . Jimi, Janis, and Otis, too. Nixon's nostalgia set in. Only the Stones and the Dead are worthy leftovers now from the days of the rock-freaks-committed-to-change. At present the public doesn't seem to want to hear about anything that's new and the art world doesn't seem to be into offering anything new. Freaky, yes—new, no.

Anybody, with feeling or without, can dress like Mick Jagger or like Holly Woodlawn or beyond. One mascara-ed eye does not a movie make. I left the avant-garde boat that Saturday of October 28 and stopped by a crowded benefit party at the Mercer Arts Center. What an avant-garde show that was, the most startling parts of which were staged by the public in the halls. What bullish costumery, such egoistic vanity, how melancholy. I began to see. The avant-garde has preached and taught audience participation to a generation of people. But it never could quite sell the notion of doing one's own thing. What I saw at the Mercer party was Andy Warhol's version of the avant-garde with everybody a hollow superstar, perhaps waiting for the screenplay, unaware that Warhol is not apt to use one. I may be wrong myself—nostalgic for an un-nostalgic time. Mercer is, by the way, an intriguing place with a variety of rooms and spaces which may well contribute to a rebirth of New York arts, avant-garde or otherwise. The costumery may only signal the need for the coming of a new climate

for artistic expression.

Thrills on the Alexander Hamilton there were, though, not least of them being the ship itself, multi-decked under a cloudy sky, looking downtown at the Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges, and featuring the light show of the Lower Manhattan skyscrapers. I liked Woody Vasulka's beautiful tv and electronic music work, assembled so you look down a hatch in the deck to see four tv sets with pure patterns changing in sync to a tape of sounds vaguely suggesting a phantom engine room and a lapping tide. I also liked Shirley

## new time

by Carman Moore

Clarke's stifling and colorful fortune-telling hut, lit up like someone's dressing room. I liked Allison Knowles's booth, made up to look like a turn-of-the-century lunch parlor, where she (always into nourishing people) every hour on the hour prepared a tuna fish sandwich and milk for the winner of a dice roll game. Geoff Hendricks and his partner, whose name I always forget, stood almost like statues on a lovely set which featured lettuce leaves, clothes-pinned to several clothes

lines to dry. The Binghamton Community TV Center made an environment which, totally through machines and electronic random impulses, hit a cymbal, blew a tuba and a trombone, bowed a double bass, and set off a siren.

And there was Charlotte Moorman's annual far-out cello piece, this one by Jim McWilliams featuring a recital in a diving suit, under East River water in a glass tank. She deserves credit no matter what happens to the direction freak arts may take. Nothing stops her—not the police, not ill health, not the regular avant-garde's aversion to festivals and straight-world publicity. She every year gets a marvelous location for the festival, and in lean years her hustling of the straight world for some concessions to the arts may amount to the freshest (and most hopeful, perhaps) aspect of the avant-garde idea. At any rate, as of now the old avant-garde remains afloat, if somewhat at sea, short of cargo, and with no friendly port on the horizon.